



## The Space of Subculture in the City: Getting Specific about Berlin's Indeterminate Territories

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## The Space of Subculture in the City: Getting Specific about Berlin's Indeterminate Territories

Dougal Sheridan

This paper is concerned with those apparently abandoned, disused, indeterminate urban areas not readily identified and included in the understanding of cities. Examining such areas of Berlin has allowed an investigation of them in relation to the historical, cultural and sociological context of a specific city, and reveals their consequential and symbiotic relationship to the rest of the city. Do the opportunities offered by fragments of the city, in the absence of the deterministic forces of capital, ownership, and institutionalisation affect cultural formation and development? Extending the notion of indeterminacy to include its cultural and sociological effects both reveals its significance as the space of subculture within the city, and allows an examination of the nature of this space. This paper is based on primary research including photographic documentation, mapping, and a case study of a particular 'indeterminate' fragment of Berlin's urban fabric recording the patterns of activity, occupation, social formation and architectural action. Walter Benjamin's observations and experiences of Berlin suggest that there are pre-existing ways of understanding these areas and the urban subjectivity they imply.

## Introduction: Two Postcards

This essay is concerned with those apparently abandoned, disused, indeterminate urban areas, which have been labelled and romanticised using the term *Terrain Vague* coined by Ignasi de Sola-Morales in the 1990s. In this discourse, 'indeterminate' has been interpreted as the absence of limits, often resulting in a sense of liberty and freedom of opportunity. Architecture is associated with a degree of determination or ordering that reduces the possibilities and potential embodied in the vacant site.<sup>1</sup> Indeterminacy may be a useful term with which to interpret these urban spaces. However I wish to extend and clarify the use of 'indeterminacy' in this context beyond merely describing the spatial characteristics of these areas. Instead I propose an understanding of indeterminate territories as any area, space or building where the city's normal forces of control have not shaped how we perceive, use and occupy them.

To do this we will look at the specific historical, cultural, and sociological context of Berlin, where the existence of such indeterminate territories has had a significant effect on the cultural life of the city. These places which are not readily identified and included in the understanding of cities, nevertheless have a consequential, symbiotic although often under-recognised relationship to the rest of the city. We will then examine existing ways of understanding these areas and the urban subjectivity they imply, by referring to Walter Benjamin's concepts of 'dialectical images' and the 'illumination of detail', including his own observations and experiences of Berlin. Extending the notion of indeterminacy to include its cultural and sociological effects reveals these indeterminate territories as the space of subculture within the city. We will examine the nature of this space with an occupational case study of a particular indeterminate fragment of Berlin's urban fabric.

The research and observations examined here were made between 1994 and 1996, while I was studying and working in Berlin and living in one of the buildings referred to in the case study. As such the observations and research in this paper document a particular time in Berlin's urban history and development. We see this in the two postcard images from this time; (Fig. 1). Rather than some timeless and identifiable scene like the architectural monument, they depict a situation of rapid change, while still being concerned with architectural or urban space - the building that is becoming and the building that is disappearing, the construction site and the ruin.

<sup>1</sup> Ignasi de Sola-Morales, 'Terrain Vague' in Cynthia C. Davidson (ed.), *Any Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 120.



Fig. 1. Two postcards; Gerd Schnürer Postcard Die Zeichenen der Zeit Berlin Friedrichstrasse 1995; Tacheles 1995.

Usually the ruin reminds us of some other past while the construction site might evoke the excitement of a new future. Ironically, observations of Berlin at the time hinted at the inverse; the completion of the buildings under construction spelt the repetition of the same; while in the ruins and residual spaces, the possibility of other less defined alternatives were being pursued.<sup>2</sup>

The first postcard depicts an area on Friedrichstrasse, which in the 1990s was the most complete and densest area of the ‘critical reconstruction of Berlin.’ The illuminated Daimler Benz emblem informs us of the corporate nature of this development. This transfer of entire districts into private ownership has been described as ‘a turning point in the history of modern urban-planning in Europe.’

The second postcard is of a semi-ruined building called *Tacheles* and its surroundings. This building remains a condensed record of the forces of extreme change to which Berlin’s urban fabric has been subjected. Originally built in 1907/08 as a grand department store, it was later used by AEG as an exhibition hall and archive named the ‘House of Technology’. The building was partly destroyed by bombing during the war and then, like much of Berlin further sections of the building were demolished to make way for roads, which in this case were never completed. After the reunification it was occupied by squatters who transformed the building and its surrounds into what has been described as a ‘centre for independent forms of cultural life in Oranienburger Strasse’.<sup>3</sup> The building incorporates a bar, cafe, theatre, cinema, furniture workshop, music and performance art venue, studios, gallery spaces, and residences. Tacheles is the publicly perceived representation of Berlin subculture. The acceptance of this building into mainstream culture by way of its postcard image, indicates the extent of this phenomenon in Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hauptman, ‘A view of Berlin’, *Werk, Bauen & Wohnen* (1995): 6.

<sup>3</sup> Planergemeinschaft Dubach & Kohlbrenner, *City Centre Projects: Office buildings and business premises* (Berlin: Lebenswertbauen, 1993).

## Berlin History: Abandoned Territory

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W. Firebrace, 'Jasmine Way',  
*AA Files* 25 (1994): 63-66.

The existence of these vacant spaces has never been officially acknowledged. On the city map they were covered over with fictitious streets, reflecting of the shame that Berlin is not like other cities with their respectable centres.<sup>4</sup>

Examining the specific history of Berlin reveals the causes and spatial positions of these indeterminate territories. They comprise those fragments of the city that were wrested out of the usual mechanisms of metropolitan development. The destruction of one quarter of Berlin by carpet-bombing in 1944 and the succession of Fascist, Communist, and Capitalist regimes, have provided the underlying conditions for this phenomenon above and beyond the usual processes of spatial obsolescence resulting from post-industrialisation. These historical circumstances culminated in two events unique to Berlin, which had a pervasive effect on both the conditions and spaces described here as indeterminate. The first situation was the erection of the Berlin wall in 1961 and the second was its removal in 1989; (Fig. 2).

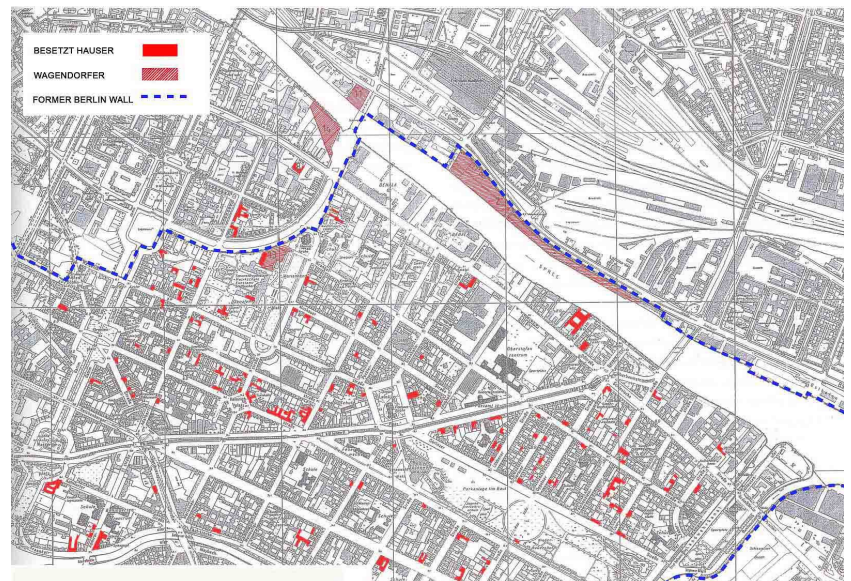


Fig. 2. Excerpt from map showing concentration of empty buildings and sites, which became occupied (*Besetzt*) in Kreuzberg when it was cut off on 3 sides by the Berlin wall. This includes some of the spaces adjacent to the wall, which were occupied shortly after its removal in 1989. Image: Dougal Sheridan, 1996.

The erection of the wall cut off the inner city district of Kreuzberg from its close relationship to Mitte, which was historically the central district of Berlin. Suddenly this working class quarter of dense tenement blocks was marginalised on the periphery of West Berlin.



The wall had the effect of strangling West Berlin's economic and social systems, resulting in Kreuzberg becoming a depopulated cul-de-sac where property had lost its value as inner city real estate.

Kreuzberg's peripheral position meant that it was no longer a through-route for traffic.<sup>5</sup> This effectively excluded it from most of the urban planning projects of the time, as described in the Hauptstadt Berlin competition of 1957, for the separation of new residential areas and commercial zones along the newly planned traffic routes. As a result, the existing urban landscape of semi-derelict housing stock and vacant tracts of land remained undeveloped.

Although Berlin became economically dysfunctional, it retained unique ideological and strategic functions for the West German government, which provided subventions amounting to almost 50% of the city's total income.<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to save Berlin from becoming a ghost city, the Berlin Senate (West Berlin had become its own self-contained state with its own parliament), introduced incentives, in conjunction with the federal government in Bonn, to bring people back to the city. The most effective incentive was exemption from compulsory military service for males living in Berlin. This had a very specific effect on the demographics of people moving to Berlin, and from 1968 onwards the city became a magnet for 'discontented youth' from all over Germany.

The city, especially Kreuzberg, was described as providing 'the setting and infrastructure for a developed, if multi-faceted and hence tension ridden Second Society.'<sup>7</sup> These people were predominantly students, youth, and immigrant *Gastarbeiter*. These 'guest workers' were predominantly Turkish and had no rights of citizenship. Many of the vacant and deteriorating buildings in Kreuzberg became occupied with a variety of cooperative enterprises, ranging from residential communes to alternative businesses. Berlin became the centre of West German political activism from which the 'alternative' movement and youth subculture developed. Kreuzberg emerged as the locale and symbol for this nascent subculture.<sup>8</sup> Kreuzberg's geographic location 'on the fringe'<sup>9</sup> also became a phrase used to describe its social situation.

For former East Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 meant the abrupt passage from centralised control over land, planning, and resources, to the mechanisms of western development. This restitution of private ownership of property nationalised by the communist regime, resulted in large tracts of property being suspended in indeterminate ownership or remaining caught within the mechanisms of the legal system. The successive acquisition of land by the Nazi

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Suhr, *Urban Renewal Berlin: Experiences, Examples, Prospects* (Berlin: Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> S. Katz and M. Mayer, 'Gimme Shelter: Self-help Housing Struggles within and against the State in New York City and West Berlin', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 9(1) (1983): 15-45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> R. Eckert and H. Willems, 'Youth Protest in Western Europe: Four Case Studies', *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 9 (1986): 127-153.

<sup>9</sup> Suhr, *Urban Renewal Berlin*, p. 71.

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A. Read and D. Fisher, *Berlin The Biography of a City* (London: Pimlico, 1994), p. 314.

regime, the Soviet occupation authorities, then the East German government, resulted in a complex situation determining ownership of this property. During the 1990s up to a third of this land of indeterminate ownership in East Berlin, was once owned by Jewish people who had either fled Germany or were killed during the war.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, as a result of former East German housing policy and the absence of renovation associated with private ownership, much of East Berlin's 19th century housing stock was not maintained and slipped into decay. This condition was so extreme that when the Berlin Wall was removed, 25000 dwellings were empty in East Berlin. This was more than twice the number that had been vacant in West Berlin in the 1980s; (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. 19th Century building fabric was neglected in East Berlin and replaced with apartment blocks (Plattenbau). Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

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Katz and Mayer, 'Gimme Shelter', p. 37.

Thus, in the vacuum of control and responsibility in East Berlin following the removal of the wall, all kinds of self-generated activities and projects sprung up as 'the alternative scene' shifted from Kreuzberg to the eastern side of the city. These groups have been described as a 'dense network of subcultures and alternative practices, encompassing around 200 000 people'.<sup>11</sup>

It is apparent from Berlin's historical circumstances that these indeterminate territories have resulted from a combination of the spatial gaps within the city and gaps within the cities regulatory forces. These indeterminate territories have taken on the form of both empty or abandoned buildings, and vacant terrains. These buildings, ruins and urban landscapes all have varied spatial characteristics and urban

properties. However, the condition they all share, and that I use here to define them as indeterminate, is the absence of the deterministic forces of capital, ownership and institutionalisation that, to a large degree govern people's relationship to the built environment. This is an understanding of indeterminacy as existing within the factors affecting the reception of architecture and urban space and not necessarily within the physical characteristics of these spaces themselves.

## Specificity and Urban Identity

The waste lands of the city which cut through its centre. They are vacant or used for what may seem like only minor activities - markets, circuses, the storage of building materials, motor-repair works, training grounds for dogs. A journey along the railway lines at times gives the impression of wild countryside scattered with the remains of an alien culture. The pomposity of Berlin's imperial monuments is somehow mitigated by the landscape in which they sit.<sup>12</sup>

Abandoned buildings offered potential for reuse, and adaptation in ways limited only by the structures themselves, and the means and imagination of the occupier. Frequently the building's potential permeability was exploited in contrast to the cellular separation of tenancies and territories characteristic of conventional building occupancy. These situations offered the opportunity for new uses and forms of living not possible within the normal tenancy subdivisions. This enabled the easy insertion of many self-initiated programmes including theatres, cinema, venues, galleries, cafés, clubs, and community spaces, allowing these locations to take on public, cultural, and political roles.

Vacant sites were settled by various mobile and temporary structures and were used for various transient activities including markets, circuses, outdoor theatres, parties, and even farming. These spaces ranged widely in nature. Some aspired to be utopian semi-agrarian communities playing public roles as places of entertainment and carnivals, while others were seen as the refuge of the 'homeless'. The large open spaces remaining where the Berlin Wall had been, allowed many of these *Wagendorfer* – literally 'wagon village' – to be centrally located on highly prominent sites. With the *Reichstag* or other Berlin institutions as a backdrop, these surreal landscapes appeared to critique conventional monumentality and fixed urban architecture by visually confronting them with open, un-institutionalised and implied nomadic space;<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 4).

<sup>12</sup> Firebrace, 'Jasmine Way', pp. 63-66.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hejduk and B. Schneider, *John Hejduk: Riga Exhibition Catalogue* (Berlin: Aedes Galerie für Architektur und Raum, 1988). As objects of counter-monumentality these *Wagendorfer* have a remarkable equivalence to John Hejduk's 'victims' and his 'traveling carnival' of objects, animals, or mobile 'homes' that have appeared in Berlin, Riga, Vladivostok and Praha.





Fig. 4. Wagendorf and farm animals with the Reichstag in the background.  
 Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

It is apparent that indeterminacy provides a space for the self-determination of the occupant. However, I would go further and suggest from the observations made above that this indeterminacy allows the occupant a less mediated and more direct relationship with the specific qualities of a place; (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Informal seating and recreational areas, dwelling structure, and outdoor theatre structure resourcefully exploiting found materials. Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

In the post communist era, Berlin's politicians and the city's development authorities have shown an ambition to establish a more complete and clear urban identity for Berlin, comparable to that of cities like Paris and London. Berlin's urban environment was described as consisting of 'faceless city fragments with isolated historical buildings, but simply not a city in the tradition of the great European cities.'<sup>14</sup> Architecture was seen to offer the 'creation of urban space which can bestow identity on a city torn in half for so long'.<sup>15</sup> These sentiments are still prevalent today within the cities' development authorities as evident in the plans to completely reconstruct the City Palace (*Stadtschloss*) on the site occupied by the former East German Parliament Building. Berlin's planning policy, *Planwerk Innenstadt Berlin*, planned to fill the gaps within the city's fabric by restoring the 19th century perimeter block typology under the guise of 'critical reconstruction'. This plan utilises Architecture as a tool in the creation of a more singularly defined urban identity.

<sup>14</sup> Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung & Umweltschutz und Technologie, *Planwerk Innenstadt Berlin, Ergebnis, Prozess, Sektorale Planungen und Werkstätten, No. 25* (Berlin: Kulturbuch Verlag, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Eberhard Diepgen (mayor of Berlin) in R Stein (ed.), *Hauptstadt Berlin Central District Spreeinsel: International Competition for Urban Design Ideas 1994* (Berlin: Birkhauser Verlag, 1994).



Fig. 6. Floating café/restaurant structures, roof terrace, and covered market all exploiting the specific qualities of their locations. Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

In these terms, indeterminate territories are spaces the city chose not to identify within itself, until recently. Identification is usually linked to the processes of incorporation, registration and control. The indeterminacy of these areas arises largely due to their position outside these forces. The absence of those conditions that usually predetermine our perception of such places, makes our encounter with their specific qualities all the more intense. For example, a canal

bank is used for floating structures, existing waste vegetation becomes a garden, a roofless ruin becomes a terrace, an industrial shed a covered market, and a bank vault becomes a club. (Fig. 6.) In these instances the particular qualities of these places becomes memorable and these conditions of indeterminacy offer us the opportunity for an unmediated experience of the specificity of a place. These conditions have also been described as allowing the creation of ‘immediate identities’ at the ‘moment in which the institutional whole is overruled by the everyday.’<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> K. Cupers and M. Miessen, *Spaces of Uncertainty* (Wuppertal: Verlag Mueller & Busmann, 2002).

## Urban Subjectivity

They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a tenant. It is in these achievements that surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘A small History of Photography’ in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter (New York: Verso, 1985), pp. 240-257.

At this stage I would like to refer to Walter Benjamin’s descriptions of urban experience based on his memory of similar spaces in Berlin from the turn of the previous century, which he describes in ‘A Berlin Chronicle’. Benjamin developed a ‘topographical conscience’ wherein he organised experience architecturally into areas of the city. He contrasts the world of respectability, affluence, apparent completeness, and permanence with the urban landscape of the subterranean, forgotten, incomplete or deserted spaces of the ‘other’. However, it is in these spaces and not the ‘countless facades of the city’ that Benjamin encounters the past and describes, ‘life pausing’.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin also encounters these outmoded redundant areas of cities in Eugene Atget’s photographs of 1920s Paris, as described above; (Fig. 7).

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘A Berlin Chronicle’ in *Reflections*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 25.

The abandoned spaces in these photographs are of the last pre-modern remnants of Paris’s medieval streets. These are images of the 19th century equivalents of the dysfunctional tracts in today’s cities, described by such terms as *terrain vague*. These images also documented ‘the Zone’, a strip of land on the periphery of Paris inhabited by a colony of rag pickers and scrap merchants, Romany and squatters: the poor and the disenfranchised who didn’t fit into the new order of Houseman’s Paris; (Fig. 8).



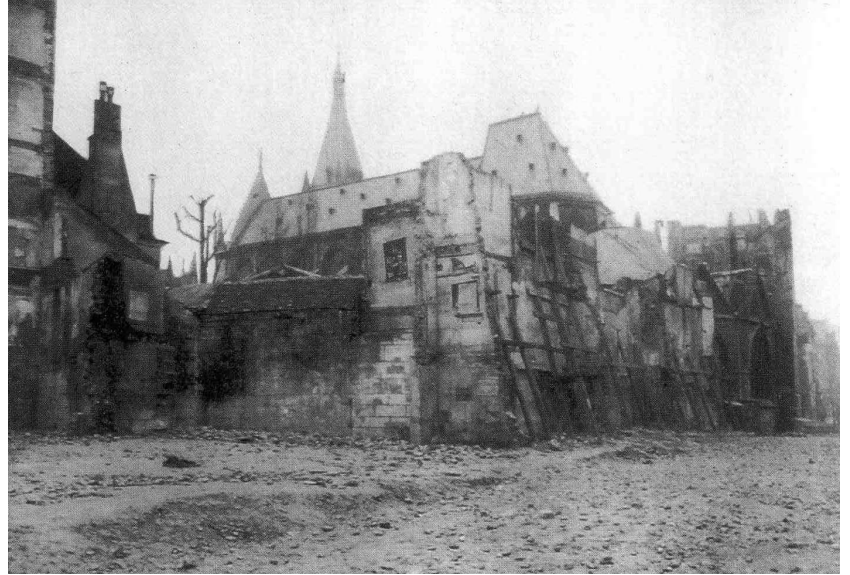


Fig. 7. Coin Rue du Renard et Pierre au Lard - Vue prise de la rue St. Merri (4e), Eugene Atget, 1912, albumen print; © supplied by George East Man House: International Museum of Photography and Film.



Fig. 8. Porte de Montreuil - zone des fortifications - zoniers, Eugene Atget, 1913, albumen print; © supplied by George East Man House: International Museum of Photography and Film.

The 'illumination of detail' was central to Benjamin's appreciation of Atget's photos. In Benjamin's archaeological analogy of memory, the goal is the 'treasure hidden within the earth: the images severed from all earlier associations that stand like precious fragments or

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

torsos in the collector's gallery - in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding.<sup>19</sup> Atget's images of these indeterminate spaces do not describe the complete whole that fits seamlessly, both spatially and historically, into the apparent continuum of the city. Instead, these spaces are characterised by the fragment, which implies both as a spatial incompleteness in the body of the city, and the temporal discontinuity of places where 'life paused'.

The implication is that these gaps in the *spatial continuum* of the city also exist as gaps in the *temporal continuum* of the city. By being both spatially dislocated from the city, and displaced from its administrative structures, these indeterminate territories are the spaces where fragments of the city fall out of the illusion of historical continuity. These spaces of indeterminacy, by existing as gaps or cracks in the hegemonic forces of the city, escape the processes of identification and incorporation that tend to locate objects, events, and our understanding of them within the dominant structures of the present.

Benjamin describes the fragment of the past dislodged from the illusion of historical continuity allowing the 'illumination of detail'. The past is not found in the continuity of urban identity, but in the specific dislodged or discovered fragment. On the urban scale, the 'illumination of detail' manifests itself in the specificity of these deserted spaces and fragments. This is because they exist outside the frame of urban identity, which usually presents an image of historical continuity.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (London: MIT Press, 1989), p. 290.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag, 1972) cited in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 290.

These fragments have the potential to be read as 'critical constellations of the past and present', or as 'dialectical images'.<sup>20</sup> As abandoned or disconnected fragments of the past, they fracture the smooth totality of the present, allowing potentially demystifying insights into political reality. Dialectical images are described as 'those "rough and jagged places" at which the continuity of tradition breaks down and reveals "cracks" providing a hold for anyone wishing to get beyond these points'.<sup>21</sup>

What occurs at this unmediated junction between the specificity of a place and those occupying it? What opportunities does this offer to those occupying such a space and do such spaces provide a critical position from which to observe the city?



## The Space of Subculture

Subcultural groups usually find themselves differentiated from more mainstream culture by: ethnicity, occupation, leisure, sexual orientation, age, and other defining traits. In German, the word *subkultur* is commonly used, not just in sociological and anthropological contexts, but also to describe various forms of ‘fringe’ cultural production.<sup>22</sup> Sola-Morales’ description of *terrain vague* as ‘mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city’, parallels the situation of subcultural groups within society. Subcultures often aspire to be, or are positioned by dominant culture as outside society; (Fig. 9).

<sup>22</sup> *Basiskultur* or ‘base culture’ is also used in the media to describe these cultural events.



Fig. 9. Youth subculture, Brunnen Str 6&7. Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

Subcultures are also characterised by situations in which cultural norms and traditions do not match lived experience. Dick Hebdige in his analysis of a series of case studies finds that ‘each subcultural instance represents a solution to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems.’<sup>23</sup> This explains the rapid evolution of subcultural groups when social, economic, cultural, and demographic conditions begin to change. The specificities defining subcultures are borne out of their attempts to ‘resolve collectively experienced problems arising from contradictions in the social structure’.<sup>24</sup> Indeed subcultures tend to construct themselves more predominantly out of social and material experience than from the cultural baggage handed down by tradition. Therefore subcultures evolve at a more dynamic and reactive

<sup>23</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Mike Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 11.

pace than established cultures and in many respects represent the marginalised edge of cultural change. These properties suggest that subcultural groups are potentially more responsive than 'mainstream culture' to the availability and specific qualities of the environments they occupy.

Subcultures often find themselves in the position of attempting to construct meaning without domicile over the forms, objects, language and spaces of the culture in which they are situated. They tend to be isolated from the productive apparatus maintaining the culture by which they are surrounded. This does not preclude subcultural construction of meaning but determines that its methods are indirect and liable to be 'deviant'. Subcultural groups construct meaning by taking those objects, signs, or forms from dominant culture and injecting them with their own meaning. This can be understood as an imbuing with meaning or an appropriation of existing cultural signs or artefacts with new or contradictory significance. This subversion or fracturing of existing identities is synonymous with generating more specific identities. Hebdige investigates this in relation to the cultural objects of fashion and compares Roland Barthes' activity of exposing the 'artificial, arbitrary nature' and 'ideological core' of dominant culture's constructions, to the way subcultures likewise interrupt the processes of normalisation;<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 10).

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Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, p. 11.



Fig. 10. Subcultural appropriation of existing objects and spaces: Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

However, it is apparent that these techniques are also applied at the scale of spaces and buildings within the city. Indeed bricolage, the juxtaposition of apparently incompatible realities, is pronounced in the occupation of spaces and objects within subculture. This is evident in examples like the visual confrontation between the architectural monument and mobile, self-built dwelling structures; the discarded objects that are assembled into art objects (like the bus wreck that becomes sculpture); and the found objects that have their original meanings and functions subverted (like the telephone box which has been turned into a toilet cubicle); (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Discarded objects assembled into art objects, services, and dwelling structures. Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

The relationship between urban experience and the formation of subculture was formulated by Claude Fischer in his 'subcultural theory of urbanism'.<sup>26</sup> He states that 'the distinctive claim of subcultural theory remains that, all else equal, cities increase rather than diminish ethnic distinctiveness'.<sup>27</sup> He also frames this inversely, stating that, 'urbanism is correlated with unconventionality, in part because it stimulates development of subcultures'.<sup>28</sup> Countering arguments to this theory are based in the Wirth's theory of 'social breakdown'.<sup>29</sup> This theory explains the higher rates of unconventionality in cities in terms of 'the "breakdown" of social control and moral order', rather than, 'the emergence of innovative subcultures and the diffusion of their culture to others in the city'.<sup>30</sup> It is not surprising that public perceptions of the subcultural spaces associated with Berlin's indeterminate territories swing between these poles.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Fischer, 'The Subcultural Theory of Urbanism', *American Journal of Sociology* 101(Nov) (1995).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 546.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (July) (1938): 3-24.

<sup>30</sup> Fischer, *Berlin The Biography of a City*, p. 560.



In relation to these theories of subcultural formation, it is apparent there are more factors than just the effects of population size and density stimulating subcultural formation or accumulation. The availability of accessible urban space for subcultural groups is a significant factor: this can be seen in the extraordinary circumstances of Kreuzberg's isolation by the wall from 1961 to 1989 and the correspondingly exaggerated nature of its social history; and likewise, the shift of the 'subcultural scene' into East Berlin directly after the removal of the wall to take advantage of its empty and undefined territories.

The nature and availability of urban space is indeed a factor that has been left outside the scope of Fisher's subcultural theory of urbanism. In fact, studies of subcultural groups often tend to concentrate on their cultural artefacts such as fashion, style, and music, but appear not to include their spatial environments.<sup>31</sup>

Acknowledging the relationship between the accumulation of subcultures and the availability of space prompts the question as to whether the nature of this space allows or affects the formation of subcultures. Do these spaces have a formative effect, or do they just provide space for existing subcultural groups? The understanding of indeterminate territories as spaces outside hegemony, offering the experience of urban fragments removed from the spatial and temporal continuum of the city, suggests that these spaces may indeed have a formative effect.

One could imagine that a subcultural space, like subcultural style, would involve both the occupation of some found form and its investment with new contradictory qualities and meanings. The ideology of the dominant culture, according to Hebdige, is often the most controlling yet unrecognised factor in physical structures. Social relations and processes are primarily understood by individuals through the structures in which they are represented to those individuals. This is particularly the case in buildings, where 'implicit ideological assumptions are literally structured into the architecture.'<sup>32</sup>

## Case Study

We will now look at a case study that documents the occupation of an abandoned complex typical of Berlin's courtyard buildings. This *Besetztes Haus* – which literally translates as 'occupied house' – was documented by the author over the period of a year spent living there as a participant observer in the years from 1994 and 1996. As we move through the plans of these buildings I will describe the observations

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cornwall: Polity Press, 1995). Sarah Thornton identifies and studies nightclubs as environments of subcultural groups (youth culture), but her observations are sociological rather than spatial.

<sup>32</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, p. 12.

that were made. Colours and hatching have been used to map the different occupant groups and uses; (Fig. 12-16).

Private/Public Spatial Graduation

Individual Spaces	Bedrooms, Studies/Work spaces
Group Spaces	Kitchen, Eating, Social, Bathrooms, Toilets
Group Shared Spaces	Bathrooms, Laundries, TV room, Children's space
Complex (Used by all groups)	Computer/Photocopying room, Library, Workshops, Darkroom, Band rehearsal
Semi- public	<i>Unter Druck</i> theatre group, Latin American resource group

Fig. 12. The breakdown of spaces and facilities from private to public was highly graduated and complex. It ranged from an individual's space, to spaces shared between a few individuals, to group spaces, to spaces shared between groups, to spaces shared by the whole complex, to spaces accessible to a specific public, to spaces accessible to the general public. The courtyards were used as shared outdoor spaces and event spaces for parties, performances etc. both for building inhabitants and the public. Images: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

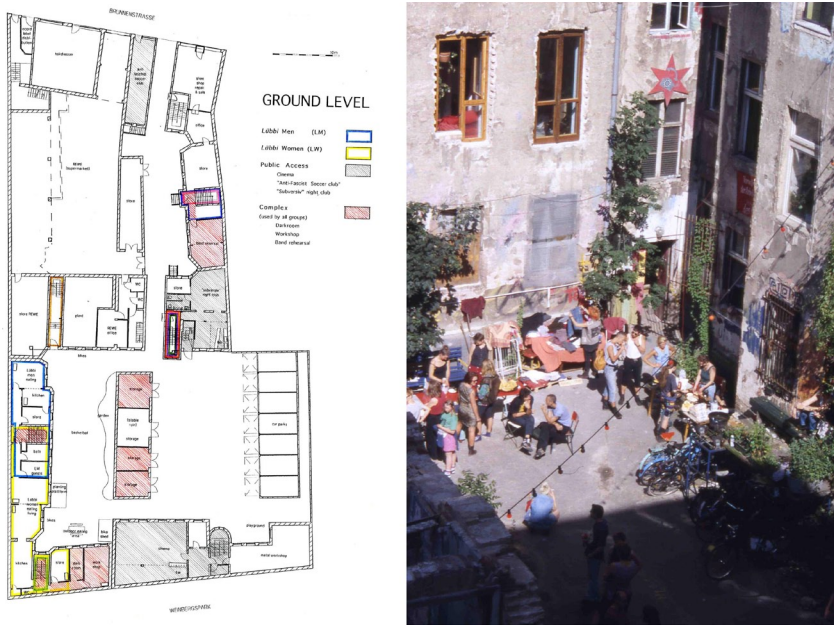




Fig. 13. Groups define themselves by characteristics such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, youth subculture, but also by the description of the particular part of the building they occupy. For example Latin American women's group, Lubbi men, a men's group, a women and Lesbian group, a punk group, a Turkish group, and then Hinter Haus 'back house', Q-Haus 'cross house' groups. In these last two instances the names describe both the groups and the parts of the building they occupy. The more public or widely shared spaces find their logical locations in the lower levels of the buildings. The complex's shared facilities (library, computer room, workshop, darkroom etc) occur on the ground or first floor levels and public access spaces like the nightclub and café/bar are on ground level. Images: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

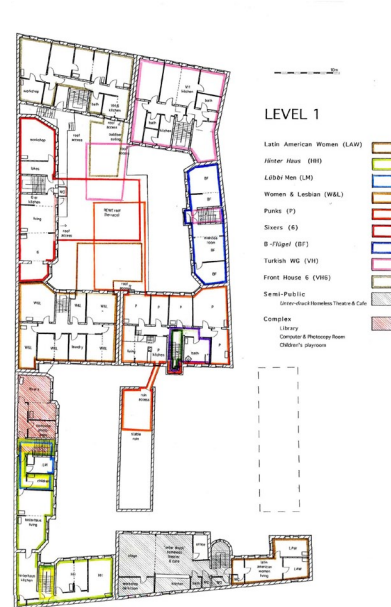


Fig. 14. The permeability of the building is increased and manipulated to suit changing needs. This involved the removal of walls and floors to make bigger social or individual spaces. This increased permeability allows the building to be traversed in numerous ways as more stairwells become interconnected. The threshold and usually the only securable door in a building is from the courtyard to a building's stair well. As a result the stair well becomes understood and treated more as an interior. In fact there tends to be no locks applied to any of the doors on the interior of the building. (In conventional occupancy the threshold point is between each stair landing and the individual apartment.) Shared services like telephones were located on stair landings, which became locations of much informal interaction. Images: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.

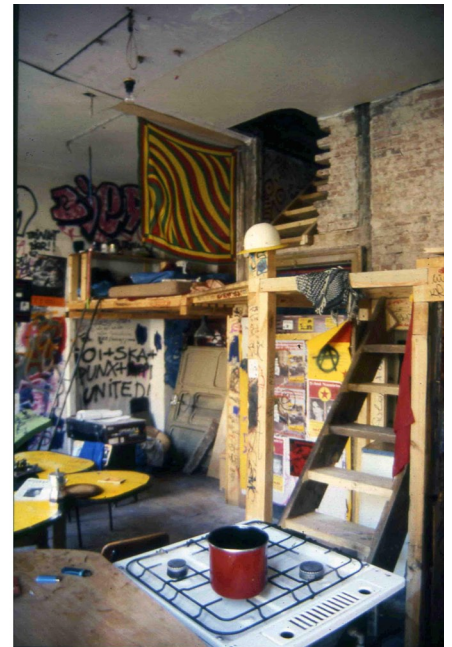
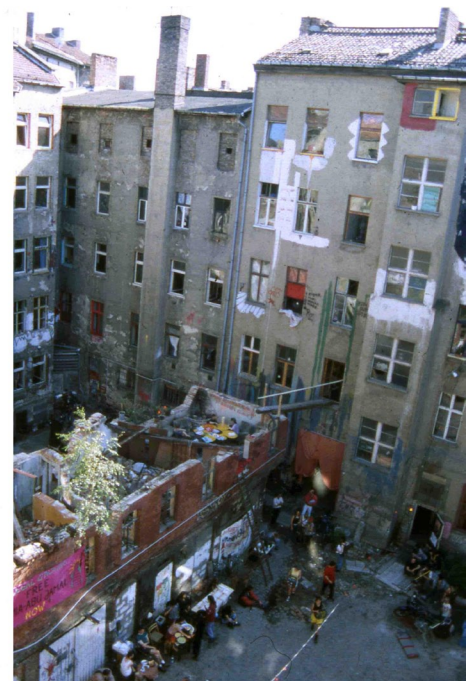


Fig. 15. The scale of various building sections influences group sizes and spaces. This means that the scale of occupancy is larger than single units, in many cases operating at the scale of an entire section of building. The Berlin courtyard building type is compatible with a complex and changing form of building occupation. The density of its arrangement, the even distribution of stairs wells, and its courtyard arrangement has a decisive influence on how the building is occupied. Images: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.



Fig. 16. The various spaces of a particular group from individual to shared/social will not always be directly adjacent to each other and may well have the circulation or shared spaces of other groups intersecting or overlapping their spaces. The extent and arrangement of a group's spaces are flexible and change as the group's size and spatial needs transform. Different territories expanding and contracting in the building may result from a change in occupancy or be due to an occupant forming living arrangements with a different group in the building. New sub-groups may also form and create new social spaces and facilities for themselves. In some cases new vertical connections were made by building new stairs up through the structure to connect specific rooms. Images: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.





## Conclusions

It is apparent that subcultural groups are exploiting the spatial opportunities observed in the case study and the spatial arrangements suiting these groups would often not be possible within the constraints of conventional building use. The occupants and building mutually influence each other to a degree not encountered in usual building occupancy. The occupants manipulate the fabric to suit their varied and changing needs and the building's form and arrangement affects the group's formations and usages. In fact, in some cases the building is incorporated into a group's identity.

Investigating the spatial environment of these groups sheds light on the objects and structures they are subverting or supplanting. This example of a *Besetztes Haus* is most illuminating when we compare the diagram of its occupation and use to that of the conventionally occupied building of the same type. We see the certainty and apparent permanence of a stratified division of space, compared to the more fluid and changing occupancy of the *Besetzte Haus*; (Fig. 17). Latent in the occupation of these indeterminate territories is the questioning of existing structures, be they material or ideological. The way in which the building is occupied and manipulated is similar to subculture's occupation, de-naturalisation, and re-inscription of cultural artefacts with new meaning.

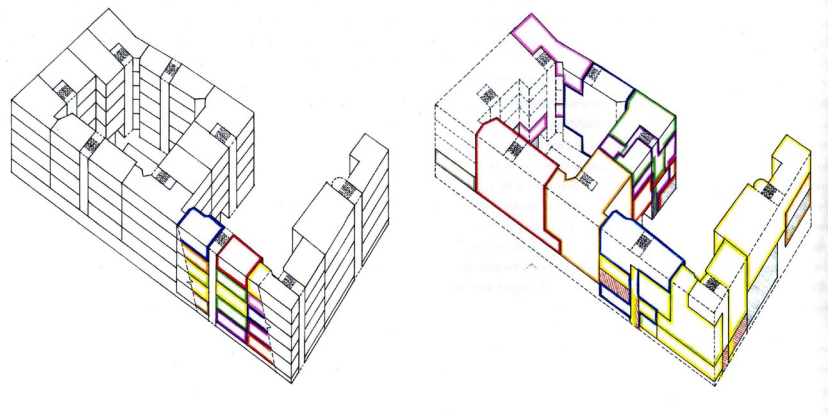


Fig. 17. Comparison of the spatial arrangement in Brunnen Str 6&7 and the conventional occupancy arrangement of a courtyard building. Areas are colour coded to match the case study's plans. Image: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996).

The absence of internal locks, potentially something 'architecturally insignificant', has an enormous effect on the space of these buildings. The resulting fluidity being equivalent to the de-institutionalisation of space where suddenly human judgement, tact, trust and

communication must accomplish the job usually done by the physical division of space. This opening up of space is further perpetrated by the removal of walls, resulting in an increased permeability and larger rooms. The application of locks to individual's rooms within the building is usually regarded as an indication of the disintegration of the community. The tasks of improving or repairing these buildings also necessitate a large degree of collective action and decision-making.

In the situations presented by these abandoned buildings, the rules of occupancy are not laid out to begin with, and the division and distribution of space and facilities are not necessarily predetermined. Thus the occupants are confronted with questions about living and the organisation of space that usually would not be encountered. As a result, normal assumptions about living arrangements may well be questioned and found to be inapplicable. Indeed, the building's nature may suggest a different type, or scale of living arrangement. The prompting of different or unconventional ideas or ways of living would indicate that these spaces could indeed have an effect on the formation of subcultural groups. Both these instances – that of the building affecting the social interaction of the inhabitants, and the inhabitants adaptation of the building to allow different social needs - suggest that occupant and building have a less mediated relationship than is usually encountered. This has already been described as the encounter with the specific potential of an urban fragment devoid of the city's usual ordering structures. The specific nature and fabric of the buildings becomes magnified by the absence of external deterministic forces. Such situations allow the occupant to interact with the built fabric as though it were a landscape that is settled rather than a structure where the rules of occupancy are pervasive. Observations made in the case study of this increased mutual influence between the urban fabric and those occupying it, revealed the formative effects of these indeterminate territories on subcultures.

Although not the focus of this study, it would be interesting to revisit the points I have elaborated here, in relation to Berlin today and other contemporary cities. Hebdige's observations are based on subcultural groups of the 70s and 80s and reflect the strong dichotomies of the ideologies of that time. Several of the points referred to above also reflect the opposing ideologies and intense contrasts and energy that defined Berlin's urban situation during the 90s, when this research was carried out.

However, since this time, the distinctions between mainstream and subcultural, controlled and indeterminate have become more nuanced both in the spaces and the pluralism of those who use them.

This is evident in Cupers and Miessens' *Spaces of Uncertainty*, which investigates life in these left over spaces of Berlin, within the broader discourse on public space. In the last decade some of these indeterminate spaces and the initiatives that took root in them have disappeared, while others have evolved into more formalised scenarios. It is hoped this essay provides an understanding of the circumstances that created these indeterminate spaces and the culture and history of their occupation.

The occupation and reinvention of disused or indeterminate areas of Berlin, described as the realm of subcultural groups in the 70s and 80s in Kreuzberg and the early 90s in East Berlin, has recently been termed the activity of 'urban pioneers' and recognised and championed by the Berlin Department of City Development (*Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung*) in its publication of the same name.<sup>33</sup> Projects that range from alternative forms of living to leisure and cultural programmes are described as 'temporary use projects'. This has allowed the retrospective official acknowledgment and acceptance of many unconventional self-initiated projects while subtly asserting the permanence of landownership, by referring to them as temporary.

33 Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, *Urban Pioneers: Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin* (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2007).

Temporary use projects are increasingly of strategic importance for urban development, for space pioneers open up new development prospects at disused sites that defy the bounds of traditional urban planning.<sup>34</sup>

34 Ibid.



Fig. 18. Potsdamer Platz, 1994. Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.



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Senatsverwaltung für  
Stadtentwicklung, *Ideen für  
Berlin: Städtebauliche und  
Landschaftsplanerische  
Wettbewerbe von 1991-1995*  
(Berlin: Kulturbuch-Verlag 1996).

This publication goes on to document and provide a handbook of the processes and players involved in realising such projects. It contrasts ironically with the equivalent publications and agenda of the *Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung* at the time that the ‘urban pioneering’ activities were perhaps at their most formative during the early 90s;<sup>35</sup> (Fig. 18). Needless to say the public spaces and informal cultural facilities that evolved out of the opportunities of indeterminacy remain less generic than those produced by the planned urban development of this period; (Fig. 19). And while many of these spaces have since moved to more peripheral areas, disappeared, or changed, the expectations and opportunities they offer continue to persist and evolve.



Fig. 19. Berlin urban beach, 2006. Photo: Dougal Sheridan, 1994-1996.